

Chile on a Hot Day

by Frank Start - VE3AJ

My travels as a wireless operator have taken me to a few strange places off the beaten path. This time it was Chile on the south west coast of South America. My knowledge of this part of the world was limited to Peru. This was my first trip on salt water. It took me from New York to California where we loaded bunker fuel for the Chilean railroad. The first leg of the journey was from San Pedro (Port of Los Angeles) to Iquique, Chile, (5100 miles) a trip with a brief look at the Galapagos Islands en route. Iquique is one of many small ports (30,000 pop. and hasn't changed in over 30 years) on the west coast which ship the country's chief export, nitrates for fertilizer.

One of the first things I noticed was the lack of a harbour for shipping. Almost all of these ports are open "roadsteads". Ships tie up to sea buoys or anchors and unload into smaller vessels. Tankers unload oil cargoes into under-water hose lines. This is because of the seas or swells which roll in from the 3000 mile Pacific Ocean.

We had a change of orders and went to Caleta Buena, a short distance up the coast. Here the land rises steeply from the beach at an angle of about 35 degrees. Three of the engineers and I decided to climb to the top. It was very hot and as usual on this coast, very dry. We went up a path, like goats, in a zig-zag fashion.

At the top we found a road with small wooden houses on each side. After a second look we saw a man approaching. By the look on his face he seemed happy. And why not-he is carrying a jug of wine. In my best (Hugoe's Simplified) Spanish, I said, "Buenos dias amigo". Even in his condition he read me perfectly. He raised the jug and said, "Saludar". So-we all had a wee taste. Another amigo appeared on the scene who had a smattering of English and it was just like old home week.

Close by was the home of the amigo who could "habla" the English. It turned out that he had been in the Chilean Navy. We were surprised to find an old Edison cylinder type phonograph, still in use, and we listened to the hi-fi from the tin horn. After a short chat and the jug being empty, we went for a short walk and found some more amigos playing soccer. Everybody in South America plays soccer and my Scottish friends were soon displaying some fancy footwork, assisted in no small way by the recent elbow bending.

Our original amigo with the jug now faded out and it was beginning to get dark. We still had to find our way back to the ship. We could not find the path which had brought us up. Instead we found some rail tracks heading straight down into the nitrate storage sheds at the bottom. It was evident that the nitrate was lowered down to the sheds in gravity operated cars. We had enough trouble trying to walk straight down the 35 degree hill without the assistance of gravity. We made a rapid decent and soon found ourselves in a large shed. We called to each other as we spread out searching for an exit. Suddenly, there was a lot of excited shouting and profane Spanish and a man appeared with a lantern. When he found we were talking in English he calmed down. He explained that he did not have visitors in the middle of the night as a rule and

that he was worried that someone might start a fire – the nitrate being such a highly combustible material. And so ended our tour of Caleta Buena, South America.

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